

January 19, 2024

Return: The God who is Merciful

Jonah 3:1-10

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...

Before we get into our text for today, let me remind you of where we have been in the story of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet of God who was given a mission to go to the city of Nineveh warn them to repent. But Jonah didn't want God to save the people of Nineveh because of the evil they had done against Israel. So, he decided to head in the opposite direction, as far away as he could get from the presence of God, and he got on a ship. But then we see that God is a God who pursues in ch.1, and while Jonah was at sea, the Lord sent a violent storm and eventually Jonah is thrown overboard by the other sailors.

As Jonah's body hit the water, not only did the Sovereign God quiet the sea, but he appointed a large fish to come and swallow Jonah and he was there for three days and three nights. It's here, as we read last week, we see that God is also a God who hears and answers the prayers of his people and he did a work in Jonah's heart. Jonah called out to God in prayer in ch. 2 and repented of his sin. Jonah stopped trying to run from the presence of the Lord and turned back to the Lord to receive help, healing, and forgiveness of his sin and distress and the Lord heard and answered him.

And after three days, the Lord commanded the fish to spit Jonah out on dry land. And that is where we left off. Now in our text this week, in Jonah ch. 3, we see Jonah fulfill God's command for him to go to Nineveh and preach a message of repentance and, more importantly, we see that God is a God who is merciful. If you are able, please stand as I read the word of God. [Read Jonah 3:1-10]

Let's start off by looking at vs. 1-2, where we see that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. This is presented to us and we're supposed to see it almost as a redo and God gives Jonah a second chance. Dr. J. Vernon McGee, in his commentary on these verses, had this to say, "I like to think of our God as the God of the second chance... And, by the way, He gives us more than two... He gives us many chances, and He has always done that. For instance, you may remember Jacob in the Book of Genesis. God had made wonderful promises to that man, yet he failed God again and again. But God would not let him go. And one night at the Brook Jabbok, God crippled his leg to get him. God would not give him up. He is the God of the second chance." Aren't you glad of that? How many chances have you been given? Now, of course, we don't want to abuse the grace and mercy of the many chances we have been given. But God is a merciful God as we'll see as we move through our text.

Back to ch.3. The first time, Jonah rejected God's command to go to Nineveh. But now, in an act of grace and kindness, the Lord is coming back to Jonah a second time and instructs Jonah to "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." This is virtually the same thing that was said by the Lord to Jonah in the opening verses of ch. 1.

It's important for us to see that God's desire did not change and his command did not change. God is not like us who are ever-changing, who say one thing one moment and something different the next. God is consistent in his person, in his character and in his word. God does not change. So in the text, the change is found, not in God, but in Jonah's response to God's command.

And we see that start to play out in vs. 3. We read that when Jonah heard from the Lord a second time, he rose and went to Nineveh. This is the opposite reaction Jonah had in ch. 1, when he arose and went to Joppa, and then boarded a ship for Tarshish. But this time, as Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, Jonah did what he was called to do according to the Word of the Lord. He obeyed.

So as Jonah arose, he headed to the city of Nineveh, which, as I mentioned last week, was 500 miles to the east of Israel. So, assuming, that the fish spit Jonah back onto the beaches from where he sailed originally in the area of Joppa, he would have had at least a three month journey ahead of him according to most scholars. Imagine Jonah, after getting his wits about him after his ordeal in the belly of the fish, never quite getting the smell off of him making this long journey.

Now, three months is a long time for Jonah to have to think about what God had asked him, now a second time, to do. Can you imagine how many times Jonah second guessed his decision? However, what we see in the text is that Jonah kept going and eventually arrived in the great city of Nineveh.

Now vs. 3 tells us that Nineveh was a great city referring to its size. The text indicates that it would take a 3-day journey to walk through it. This was a massive city, many believe that it was the largest city in the Middle East during this time.

And in vs. 4, as Jonah was walking through this massive city for only a single day, we see that he wasn't just sightseeing, but as he walked through the city, he was on a mission to preach the message God told him to, if the city did not repent of their evil deeds and turn to the Lord in repentance and faith, in 40 days, the city would be overthrown. Meaning, without repentance and faith, the judgment of God would fall on them, and they would receive the just consequences of their sin.

A word of interest here is "overthrown." This is the same word used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 19, meaning we're meant to see the connection to the complete destruction brought about by God's judgment due to wickedness. The fact of the matter is that Nineveh will face a similar fate if they don't

repent. Now, that's a strong message, and not an easy one to share. If you have ever shared the gospel with someone who has yet to believe, you know that it is not easy to call out sin and to talk about judgment. But that is exactly what Jonah did, and not just to one person, but to the entire city.

It's generally understood that this was only a summary of his message and that he said other words in his message to them. And as Jonah preached God's Word, we see that God did an incredible work, a work that I hope we are longing for him to do in our midst as well. As he went about warning of God's coming judgment, we see that the people believed. Just like we saw in Acts 2, when Peter preached to the crowd at Pentecost and the people were "cut to the heart," the once-hardened sinners of Nineveh, who were known throughout the region for their evil deeds, now, through the preached word, believed.

And as we move to vs. 5, we see something else incredible happen. As the people of Nineveh believed in God, we also see signs of their repentance and faith when they called for a fast and they put on sackcloth. Now, in the Old Testament, and throughout the Near Eastern world during that time, fasting and sackcloth were visible pictures of brokenness over sin, a desire to repent. That had to be an amazing sight to see. All over the city, people displaying visibly their repentance and faith before God.

What's more, it even got the attention of the king of Nineveh, which we read about in vs. 6. The word of the Lord that Jonah preached had even reached the ears of the king. But notice that it didn't just reach his ears, but it also reached his heart. And he reacts the same way as everyone else. He removes his robe and humbles himself by also putting on sackcloth and we're also told that he sat in ashes. Ashes were also a symbol in those days to show a person's brokenness over sin.

And in vs. 7, we see the king then issued a proclamation for the people of Nineveh, they were to let neither man nor beast nor flock taste anything. A sign that Nineveh had reached the point of repentance. They were not to feed or drink, meaning the fast was to be observed throughout the entire city. The king was fully onboard with what was taking place, and he was so serious about it that it wasn't just people that were to fast, but even their livestock were to join in.

What we see here is an all-out revival in that Nineveh heard the warning of Jonah in ways that they were fully cut to the heart. Their eyes were opened to the reality of God's judgment that was coming against them for their wicked ways. And as they understood the judgment of God that was about to come upon them, they put their entire hope in God to find forgiveness for their transgressions.

At the end of vs. 8, we see that the intention behind that decree was for everyone to turn from his evil ways, to turn from the violence that is in his hands. In short, this wasn't just some kind of religious ritual of fasting and sackcloth. Rather, for the king, he was driving for a true repentance for the people, with the hope we read about in vs. 9 [Read].

To say it again, the city knew their only hope was that God would be merciful and spare them from judgment. There was nothing the king or the city of Nineveh could do to defend themselves against the hand of God's judgment. There was nothing they could do in terms of trying to escape by running away. Their only hope was to turn to God with the hope that he would relent and save them. Which the good news is this is exactly what happened.

The Lord was merciful and saved the city. [read vs. 10] Nineveh was saved because of the grace and mercy of God, which was a grace and mercy that God worked in their hearts. Through his word and the power of the Spirit, God changed the hearts of this great and wicked city and brought them to faith and repentance. God gloriously put his saving work on display, something not even Jonah would have ever expected.

Now, this is where we start to see the purpose of the Book of Jonah. Remember the events took place years before they were written down and the original readers would have been the people of Israel reading about one of their prophets. And any Israelite who was reading or listening closely would recognize that the phrase "relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them" is the exact same phrase found in Ex. 32:14. In that context, the Lord had threatened to wipe out the Israelites for their idolatry with the golden calf, and yet, in response to Moses's prayer, he "relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them."

This should have humbled the Israelites. They too, once, faced the judgement of God and were shown mercy. They are not above the Ninevites spiritually but in the same position with them: equally in need of God's merciful grace. And as we'll see, as we make our way through the Minor Prophets, God warned his people again and again, but, unlike the evil city of Nineveh who heard the message and repented, they not only rejected the message but also killed many of the prophets. Much like we see in the NT when Jesus uses the tax collectors and sinners to point out the flaws in the religion of the Pharisee's, we're meant to see the same comparison here. As I said a few weeks ago, as I introduced our theme, God is not after empty religion and going through the motions. He is after a truly repentant and changed heart of a person that is willing to lay down his or her own wants and desires and earnestly follow after him.

So, in Jonah 3, we are reminded that God is a God who is merciful. He is the God of the second chance. He is willing and able to forgive even the vilest offender, as the old hymn says, if they truly repent and believe. And so we are meant to see ourselves, as believers, in the place of Jonah. Are we simply going through the motions of religion? If so, we are being called to return back to the true relationship of following Jesus. Realizing that the same merciful God who gave Jonah a second chance is giving us the same and is expecting us to carry on that same message of repentance to those who need hear it. Romans 10:14-15 says, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to

hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" So, let's examine ourselves, return and realign ourselves with the Lord with a repentant heart and share the good news of gospel with those who need to hear that God is merciful God. Let's pray.

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. – Eph. 3:20-21