

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

BEYOND SALVATION?

Jonah is often referred to as God’s most reluctant prophet. I can understand his reluctance. We believe in forgiveness. We believe that people can be changed by the power of God’s grace.

But, aren’t there some people who are just beyond saving? That’s what Jonah thought about the people of Nineveh.

The Assyrian military was renowned for their cruelty. They routinely used torture as a way to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies. And these are the people who totally destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.

There were many reasons to fear and loathe the Assyrians. It would be like one of us receiving a call to go and preach a message of repentance to the Communist leaders of North Korea. Not only would it be dangerous; it would also be foolhardy.

So we can understand why Jonah rejected God’s call. In fact, Jonah not only rejected God’s call he set sail in the opposite direction.

Most of us have not had a call to preach a message of repentance to our sworn enemies. But, I think many of us have set sail in the opposite direction when faced with the challenging call of God.

Last week we talked about how many of God’s prophets tried to reject God’s call. They said I’m too old. Or they said I’m too young. They said I’m not a good speaker. They said I’m too sinful.

But, in each case God did not accept their excuses. God said that his plan took precedence over their plans. Their job was to follow. God would give them what they needed to do the job when the time came.

RUNNING FROM GOD

Jonah took a different approach. Jonah didn't argue with God. He just ran from God. He tried to find a place where God couldn't find him.

I know. It's a silly idea to think that we can hide from the Creator of the whole world by moving to a Spain. But, that's what Jonah did ... or at least that's what Jonah attempted to do.

Many of us try to do the same thing.

Maybe we try to hide from God by putting all our time and effort into our job. Maybe we try to hide from God by making an idol out of our family and friends.

Maybe we try to hide by drinking too much or eating too much. Maybe we try to hide from God by putting our self down. Or maybe we try to hide from God by building our self up.

But, mark this. No matter where we go and no matter what we do God will find us. You can't run away from God.

Just ask Jonah. Jonah found that out in a really big way that you can run but you can't hide from the Creator of Heaven and Earth. That, of course, is a very silly thing to try. But, we keep trying.

CONVINCED BY STORMS AND A BIG FISH

Storms assailed the ship that was taking Jonah away from God's call. The sailors had not seen a storm like this before and so they rolled the dice to see who had made the "gods" angry.

Jonah came up "snake eyes" and so they asked him, "What have you done to make your God so mad?"

Jonah told his shipmates that he was trying to run away from the God who made heaven and earth. And to the credit of the captain and crew they tried to save Jonah, but it was to no avail. No one can stand against the wind and the waves.

And so Jonah told them to throw him overboard. When they did, the storm stopped and Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish that God had prepared for the occasion.

It took a lot, but this dramatic captivity finally convinced Jonah that he couldn't run from the call of God. Jonah prayed for deliverance from the belly of the beast. And God delivered him. The great fish spewed Jonah out onto the dry land.

Jonah was delivered from a seemingly hopeless situation. And it was the power of this deliverance that forced him to finally say “yes” to God’s call.

But, though Jonah said yes, Jonah was still a very reluctant prophet. He did the bare minimum when it came to his Nineveh sermon.

In fact Jonah preached as he walked (And it took a lot of walking. Nineveh was a huge city. According to the Scripture it took three days just to walk across it.) Jonah said simply, “In forty days Nineveh will be smashed.”

This was how Jonah responded to the call of God, with a short one-sentence sermon and a bad attitude. Jonah just wanted to preach the message and get out of town before these barbarians decided to kill him.

But, it didn’t go as Jonah had envisioned. The people didn’t reject Jonah or his message. Instead, the people of Nineveh repented. They put on sackcloth, and they didn’t eat or drink anything.

(Actually the depth of their repentance is illustrated by those verses that we didn’t read today. Not only did they put on sackcloth and fast; they also put sackcloth on their animals and made them fast! Can’t you just imagine the sight of those loud hungry animals with sackcloth hung on their bodies?)

Their repentance was sincere. They truly wanted to turn from their evil ways.

GOD CHANGED HIS MIND

And the Bible tells us that God changed his mind. God decided not to bring calamity upon the people of that city. And so Jonah said, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” Right? Well, not exactly.

It’s at this point in the story that we learn why Jonah ran away from the call of God. Jonah didn’t run away because he was afraid of bringing God’s message to the people of Nineveh.

Jonah ran away because he was afraid of what God might do. Jonah knew the heart of his gracious God. And Jonah wanted to slow down God’s grace by going in a different direction.

Jonah knew that God was slow to anger and full of loving-kindness. Jonah liked the idea of God’s grace when it came to his own people. But, when it came to people from Nineveh, he was not so enthusiastic.

The really shocking thing about the story of Jonah is not the storm or the whale or any of the other spectacular elements in the story.

The really shocking thing about this story is the fact that God changed his mind. God forgave the enemies of God's people. And that was a really hard pill for Jonah to swallow.

In fact Jonah got mad at God. Jonah said, "If you're going to save people like this, then I don't want to go to heaven. Just kill me now and get it over with."

You might remember that the religious leaders had the same problem with Jesus. Jesus ran around healing and forgiving the wrong people. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus talked about grace that even extended to enemies.

And Jesus could even cite examples from the Hebrew Scriptures (our lesson for today being one of them) where the enemies of God's people were saved by grace.

This message was not well received. Jesus was eventually killed for such a message.

LEARNING THE LESSON OF GRACE

Grace is a wonderful thing, unless we're talking about grace for our enemies. Then it's a reason to be depressed. That's how Jonah viewed God's grace. He went outside the city and sat down, waiting in the hot sun for the destruction to begin.

But, it didn't happen. The Assyrians repented, and God relented.

But, God did have mercy in a small way on Jonah as he waited in vain for the Assyrians to be destroyed. God appointed a plant to grow, and this plant gave Jonah some shade for his hot head.

Jonah appreciated the shade in the hot desert sun. In fact he grew to love that plant.

But, then God appointed a worm to destroy his precious shade plant. And the hot sun baked poor old Jonah's head. Jonah got angry about that beloved plant, and once again Jonah was talking about wanting to die.

When we're depressed about something big, sometimes just the smallest problem can make us go crazy. That's what happened with Jonah.

And God once again came to Jonah with a message.

He said,

"Look at what you're doing. You're upset over the death of a common plant. In fact you are showing more compassion over this plant than you've shown toward the people of Nineveh.

But, Nineveh is a huge city over 120,000 people strong. And these people are totally clueless. Shouldn't I have compassion on them?"

And that's how the story of Jonah ends. It ends with a question. Shouldn't God have compassion on this city filled with clueless people?

We often try to demonize our enemies, to say that they all deserve destruction. Certainly there are some leaders and some governments that have done some terrible things. They need to be judged and replaced.

But, what about all those people who have nothing to do with the atrocities and the injustice? What about all those people who are merely the pawns of those in power?

Shouldn't we have compassion on people like that? Shouldn't we pray for their salvation? Shouldn't we reach out to them?

Of course we should. But, sometimes we don't think about the big picture.

THE MIRACLE OF FAITH

God is always trying to expand our vision and point us in a new direction. And when we take a detour from God's will, when we try to run away from God's call, He sometimes has to throw a rather large roadblock in our way to get us back on the right track.

For Jonah that roadblock was a big storm and a big fish. I wonder. What roadblock might God throw in our path?

God still uses the eye of the storm and the belly of the beast to bring us back to Him. When things are going badly for us we cry out to God and ask for His guidance.

When life swallows us whole and spits us up on the shore, then we are ready to hear God's call. When the sun bakes our head and we are disappointed by life, then we are prepared for the message of compassion and salvation.

Yes, believe it or not God can change His mind. God does not change His mind because he is capricious or less than God. God changes His mind about us because God is gracious.

God understands our weakness. God has compassion on us. God forgives us. And God has charged us to bring that message of grace to the whole world.

The Bible doesn't say that God so loved the church that He sent his Son. The Bible says that God so loved the world that he sent His Son. We may think that the folks in Nineveh won't hear anything that we have to say. But, it's not our call. God is in charge.

And sometimes, by the power of His grace, the people that we thought were beyond hope act in the most surprising ways. They repent. They go in a new direction. They turn toward God.

Faith is always a miracle. Faith is an act powered by the Holy Spirit. God can and does use the worst sermons to produce bring about a change of hearts. Just ask Jonah.

We live in a world that is, like Nineveh, resistant to faith. In times like these it is sometimes tempting to turn the church into a kind of fortress where we gather together with people just like us for support and comfort. We build the walls high to keep out the riffraff.

But, the church was never meant to be a fortress. The church is not a place where good people shine their halos. The church is a hospital for sinners. The church is a place where people believe in forgiveness and grace. The church is a place where hope reigns eternal.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The church is the place where we prepare for mission. And we are sent out with a heart of compassion to a place called Nineveh, a place that needs to hear the good news. Change is possible. God loves you. God has compassion on you.

There are two common mistakes when it comes to the mission of the church. The first is to be exclusive and haughty, “We’re saved, sorry about you.”

And the second mistake is to quit doing mission altogether in the name of tolerance. “We must not attempt to evangelize others because that implies that we arrogantly think that we are right and they are wrong.”

God didn’t send Jonah to the folks at Nineveh because they were right. God sent Jonah to the folks at Nineveh because they didn’t have a clue.

The great religions of the world do not say the same thing. They say very different things. They have different views of God. We should respect that and try to understand those differences.

But, this should not stop of us from bringing them the gospel. If we understand other religions we can talk about areas where we are in agreement, but we can also talk about those areas where we differ. This is not arrogance but true respect and honesty.

And sometimes those honest conversations lead to change. Sometimes those conversations lead to conversion.

That was the story of the early church. Jews and Gentiles, former enemies became brothers and sisters in Christ. Greeks who worshipped many gods and had an intellectual disdain for the Christian message were changed by the power of the Spirit into believers.

And that story has continued down the ages.

In this political season many make the charge that a certain candidate flip-flops, that he has made too many changes in his position to be trusted. If you really believe something then you shouldn't change. Consistency is valued above everything else.

But, today's story teaches us that God changes his mind. Can we follow a God who flip-flops?

We can because God changes out of love and compassion. And if we can open our hearts to a God of change, perhaps we can learn to expect and welcome change in others.

It is not up to us to say who may or may not be saved. Only God knows that, and today's lesson suggests that God is always willing to push the boundary, to reach out to those who seem unreachable; to hold out hope to those that the world thinks is hopeless.

GUILTY!

Karl Menninger told of a stern faced man who stood on a busy street in Chicago. As people passed by he would lift his right hand and point at one of them. Then he would say loudly, "Guilty!"

Then without any change of expression he would stand stiff for a moment before repeating the gesture. He would raise the arm, point and say once again, "Guilty!"

People scurried away from the man and his odd pronouncements. But, one man turned to another and asked, "How did he know?"

The Bible teaches us that guilt and sin are universal. All have sinned and fall short. The question is what do we do when we are confronted with our sin. Do we repent and run toward God or do we simply try to run away?

Two brothers were convicted of stealing sheep and according to the brutal punishment of that day, were branded on their forehead with the letters ST that stood for "sheep thief."

One of the brothers unable to bear the stigma tried to run away from his past in a foreign land. But, people would ask him about the letters on his brow and what they meant. And so he wandered from land to land, and at length, full of bitterness, he died and was buried in a forgotten grave.

But, the other brother repented of his misdeed and did not leave home. Over the years he established a reputation for integrity and respectability.

One day a stranger in town saw the old man with the letters ST branded on his head. He asked what the letters might mean.

After thinking for a while the villager replied, "It happened a long time ago, and I have forgotten the particulars, but I think the letters are an abbreviation of the word Saint."

What was the difference between these two brothers? One was unable to throw off his stigma even in a foreign land and one was remembered as a saint.

The difference between a sheep thief and a saint is this. A thief runs. A saint repents.

We don't know how Jonah's story ends.

I wonder if he kept running from God's forgiveness. I wonder if he kept blaming his problems on someone else. I wonder if he continued to reject God's grace toward others and in so doing separated God's grace for his own life.

I hope not. Perhaps the very fact that we have his story indicates that Jonah finally understood and accepted God's gracious ways.

But, God's question to Jonah is God's question to us today. Shouldn't we have compassion on the people of Nineveh even as God has had compassion on us?

Our salvation hangs in the balance.

Amen.