

GOOD NEWS FOR WHOM?

Jonah 3:3-10; 4:1-11

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First Christian Church

Rev. Josh deSteiguer

Wichita Falls, Texas

³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

¹⁰When 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.

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' ⁴And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

9 But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' ¹⁰Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

We all know and love the story of Jonah. The story of this woe begotten, reluctant prophet and his long weekend inside the belly of a great fish is one of the most popular bible stories for all ages. We teach it in children's Sunday school and Vacation Bible School. It is one of *Veggie Tales* most popular episodes. Almost any children's Bible or Bible story book will contain this story, usually with a colorful illustration of Shamu's great-great grandfather hacking up old Jonah on the beach somewhere. Likewise this church's own hit Facebook show "story time with Miss Claire" contains a retelling of this story complete with a guest appearance by a ruggedly handsome actor (if I do say so myself) wearing a wig akin to an 80's rock star. I even had help telling the story from the giant whale pool float that has resided in the choir room for longer than I have worked here. I have heard, read, and even told this beloved story more times than I care to remember but I specifically remember acting it out in a game of charades at junior high church camp in Athens Texas. There, several of us played the part of the sailors who enthusiastically threw the smallest guy from our small group off the porch of the dining hall on the creative side, while a JV lineman played the part of the great fish and tackled this poor kid while making grotesque unhuman gulping noises. Everyone guessed the bible story correctly, but we did get a talking to from some counselors. This story is one of my core memories of growing up in the church. And I'm sure it is for many of you as well.

However this is the perfect story for this series, “Bible stories you thought you learned as a kid” because so often in the retelling of the story we leave out the entire last half of the story. Many times we seem to kind of drift off after Jonah is unceremoniously regurgitated onto dry land after three days and nights of being fish food in the first submarine voyage in recorded human history. However this tiny little book of Jonah contains four chapters and the story we tell only covers two. Don’t get me wrong, the kid’s version of this story is a worthy one; full of faith lessons for us as well. A servant of God who knows the Lord and hears God’s voice is called to do something scary, go and call a large wicked city to repent, yet rather than go he runs. This story resonates with many of us as we too can identify with feeling called to do something that scares us and trying to weasel out of it by any means possible. The old familiar story of Jonah and the big fish, is even a favorite among pastors as many of us have had seasons of avoiding our call or even stating that we would never do ministry. My wife is one of these pastors who loves the Jonah story as in college her and her best friend swore to each other that though they would always serve the church neither of them would under any circumstances do two specific things...become ordained ministers, or marry an ordained minister. Of course, twelve years later they are both reverends and both married to ordained ministers as well. Now, while I would like to think that I am such a catch that I made going back on her promise worth it, in reality in the case of my wife, and the case of Jonah we see two great truths. First when God wants something, God gets it. And secondly God might just have a keen sense of humor with a healthy dose of irony.

But today, we get the rest of the story, with even more humor if you know where to look, and more drama from our grouchy prophet who is now mad that the Ninevites even listened to him because now God won’t smite them after all. After encountering Jonah’s attitude in this text I am beginning to wonder if the fish spat him up because he

was rotten and gave the fish a stomach ache. Jonah in chapter four is so overdramatic. He is so mad that God spares Nineveh that he says that he would just rather die than hang around for this. The humor of this is that Jonah is so mad over the fact that he is probably the most successful prophet in in the Hebrew Bible. Take for instance Isaiah and Jeremiah, two of the best known prophets, they had careers of 50 years and 40 years respectively. They each wrote a book more than ten times the length of the book of Jonah. They prophesied to God's people in, Jerusalem, God's city, and still the people never changed their ways. Jonah on the other hand is in the evil city of Nineveh. Outside of the borders of Israel, a foreign people of foreign gods. Another aspect of this story that we so often fail to realize is the depth of evil associated with Nineveh. This is a city known for being the head of the Assyrian empire, which at its height was known for its cruelty. Known for having a king who would build a pyramid of his dead enemies to send a message to potential adversaries. After doing a little research, I have found that they were known for cruelty, torture, and executions in ways that are uncountable in polite company. They are the ultimate bad, the ultimate other. When we realize this, Jonah's anger becomes more relatable and more understandable. Yet the results of his preaching among the wicked are undeniably successful. In just three days his message makes its way to the king who decrees that the whole city will repent of their evil and turn to the Lord. We are not talking about a simple I'm sorry here, the entire city goes into mourning, they even put sack cloth on cattle and make them fast too in order to show repentance before the God of Israel. It is one of the most incredible instances of true deep down repentance in the Bible. And Jonah, rather than praising God or being pleased with himself is absolutely livid. I don't know about you, but as someone who dabbles, mostly poorly in the art of preaching, if I preached a sermon that resulted in 120,000 people changing their ways and seeking to follow God I would feel pretty good about myself. Jonah though throws a pious pity party of epic proportions. He goes out

on a hill to sulk and hope that God will smite the city after all and God takes this opportunity to teach him a lesson. God provides a leafy plant to grow out of the ground and provide shade for the pouting prophet and he is pleased that God is doing something especially for him. Then God sends a worm to eat the plant and a scorching wind to bother Jonah and once again the hissy fit starts back up with Jonah saying that he is once again so angry he wishes he could die. God responds with reminding him that if Jonah can be that concerned about a plant, then God can be worried about a city of 120,000 people barreling towards their own demise. Here we see the creator of the universe who has just caused the repentance of a great city, working through the worm and the plant, as God did through the whale and the storm. All to try to get the message of reconciling grace and extravagant mercy through the thick skull of Jonah. In this we see that in God's infinite capacity to reconcile us to Godself, God deals with a mighty city and a disgruntled individual with the same care and compassion. And then the story ends abruptly as though Jonah simply takes his toys and goes home angry. Or maybe he really was so mad that he spontaneously combusted on the spot as he seemed to be threatening a few verses ago.

This story of Jonah, the rest of the story, just might be the most incredible, wonderful, and challenging part of this miniscule book of the Bible. It just might be that the part of the story that is so often overlooked teaches us more about the good news of God's salvation than the first two chapters about a fleeing prophet turned to fish food ever could. Here in the rest of the story we are confronted with the uncomfortable notion that God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness, are bigger than we could ever imagine. That God's plan to reconcile this broken world full of broken people just might include those who if we were honest wish that God wouldn't bother with. Here we see Jonah a righteous but flawed man preach repentance but not really expect it to work. Not on them, not Nineveh, they are too far gone to save. Sure God is merciful and that was a

really good thing when Jonah ran from God and repented in the belly of a whale, but not when that same mercy is applied to those wicked Ninevites within their city walls. I'm sure many of us can identify more closely with Jonah than we would like to admit. We all have our own stories of being lost in our sin, of totally blowing it, of hurting others, and even running from God. But we also each have our own Nineveh. Those who we would not consider as eligible for God's forgiveness. We all come to this table confessing that we are sinners saved by grace and claiming the good news of God's mercy as our own. But sometimes we ignore the hard and troubling truth that God's mercy does not abide within the walls of our church or within the bounds we put on it but that it is truly good news for every sinful human being. God's grace is not just for Christians and church folks. God's grace is extended to rioters and republicans, dictators and democrats, social distance sticklers and mask mandate mockers alike. It is for those who have offended and even hurt us. And all are extended the second, and third, and thousandth chance to repent, turn from their sins and come to the table of grace. Coming to the table certainly includes turning from sin towards righteousness. Thanks be to God though, the invitation itself that our lord makes is not based in any way on our own righteousness or worthiness. Because the God that heard Jonah in the belly of the whale, and the sinful king of Nineveh and his burlap clad bovines is the same God who through our lord Jesus Christ extends the opportunity for reconciliation to all. And our job is not to be the gatekeepers of grace. It is not our job to be the ones to determine who gets an invitation to the table. Rather it is our job to live a life marked by repentance. To live as examples of how God's mercy changes hearts and lives. And to go out into our own hurting world and to speak to people as one sinner to another, saying that while we don't have the answers, we know the one who can make us forgiven.