

Sermon Draft

Text: Jonah 3:1–5, 10

Sermon: “Into Nineveh We Go”

Our text includes one of most children’s favorite Biblical characters, Jonah. He is a bit of a different character from other prophets. He had to be called not once but twice. The Book of Jonah has been discredited by critics of the Bible who regard it not as a historical event but as a fable or legend. The notion of being swallowed by an enormous sea creature and surviving seems to them to be impossible. But then again, the same critics reject all the miracles of the Bible. Jesus affirms the historicity of Jonah in Matthew 12:39–4.

Our text takes up the story of Jonah after his first failure to obey the Lord (chapters 1–2). It precedes the account of Jonah’s anger when his second call is successful in bringing the hated Assyrians to repentance and God responds in mercy (chapter 4).

To some extent, it is understandable why Jonah was such a reluctant prophet. He was being sent to Nineveh, the very heart of the brutal Assyrian Empire.

It was early in the eighth century, and the might of the Assyrians was growing which led to fear among other nations, including Israel and Judah. Those fears were well grounded. Assyria would indeed conquer and destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel and threaten the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This historical context is important because it helps us understand the reluctance of Jonah and, perhaps, even his sinful anger when Nineveh was spared.

So, Jonah is told to go to Nineveh but tries to head in the other direction, only to be swallowed then spit out by a huge sea creature. Jonah, though, is given another chance by the Lord, and his mission to Nineveh is a success, for the people repent. Unfortunately, Jonah becomes angry that God spared Nineveh, and the story ends with a divine rebuke to Jonah.

That outline of the story of Jonah shows us a very reluctant prophet. He did not choose to be called to that vocation. He was a weak and sinful man, very much like the rest of us, and when his call came, he wanted desperately to avoid it.

It is here, after the first failed mission and the messy business with a sea creature, that we pick up the story of Jonah in chapter 3. He is called to the vocation of prophet for a second time, and this time he goes off to Nineveh, that city he wanted to avoid. Nineveh is a frightening place to go. Jonah was sent to “the belly of the beast.”

Nineveh was the capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire. It was one of the most violent and cruel empires in the history of the world. When Assyria conquered territories, there always followed a slaughter of many and the enslavement of the rest. Assyria’s kings gained and held the throne by threats, destruction, and oppression. Preaching in this corrupt and evil capital of international terrorism, as Jonah knew, would not exactly be a vacation. Yet it is into this corrupt culture that Jonah was to go and proclaim the destruction of the city.

What Jonah probably did not know was what this evil place would do to his nation. Before the end of the eighth century BC, the Assyrians would invade and devastate the northern tribes of Israel. The land and people would be brutally assaulted, the towns destroyed, and many people taken captive.

The Lord had sent many prophets to Israel to call his own people to repentance and life, but they refused. In the end, Israel brought on its own destruction, and only the Lord could restore them.

Nineveh was a huge city, and there would be no easy exit. ***“Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth”*** (v 3).

This presented a challenge to Jonah in proclaiming the message throughout Nineveh. The “city” meant not only the “inner city” but also included the surrounding suburbs and towns.

Everywhere Jonah preached the Lord’s message, he knew that he was putting himself into the hands of angry Assyrians. This meant Jonah would for days be exposed to danger. Obviously, he did not have the modern convenience of a truck with a megaphone system to travel and preach at the same time. The message Jonah had to proclaim would not be a popular one: ***“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown”*** (v 4). His progress would have to have been slow as he stopped to warn each part of the city. There would be no quick exit if the inhabitants attacked him.

Jonah's preaching was certain to offend the merciless powerful who might well seek to silence him. His life was in true peril, and he could no longer run away.

Yet our Lord will work his purpose even in Nineveh. Jonah preached the Lord's message, not his own. So, what happened in Nineveh through Jonah's word of warning? We have no record of Jonah's words beyond his warning, ***"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown"*** (v 4). But that was enough. The people of Nineveh ***"believed God"*** and ***"called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least"*** (v 5). Even the king joined in by leaving his throne and royal robes and sitting in sackcloth and ashes (v 6). Then he proclaimed a fast and sackcloth for all his subjects and even for their animals (vs 7–8). Yet there was to be more the king decreed that every person was to ***"turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands"*** (v 8).

Fasting and sackcloth would be futile and meaningless without repentance. Out-ward acts do not free the sinner.

Even the king of Nineveh understood this when he said, ***“Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish”*** (v 9).

Our Lord is merciful and does not desire the death of a sinner. We humans can easily write off those who seem to us the epitome of evil humanity. Surely there can be no salvation for people such as these! So, in our own self-righteousness, we turn away from those we consider to be unredeemable. But God does not! The miracle of divine grace is more powerful than the worst of human sin. ***“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do”*** (v 10). Jonah was a prophet, but he was a very faulty human being too.

He had been given a second chance to go to Nineveh after he ran from the first call. He himself had been forgiven and restored. The Lord would work through his preaching to bring Nineveh to repentance. But when he saw that the Lord had relented, he was exceedingly displeased (4:1).

How quickly Jonah forgot the forgiveness the Lord had extended to him after he tried to run away to Tarshish! So, the Lord asked, “***Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city?***” (4:11)

The grace of our Lord is sufficient for all “Ninevehs.” Wherever human sin is strongest, the grace of God is stronger. Our world is filled with places that can be called modern Ninevehs. The ancient Assyrians were truly a frightening empire, and Nineveh was the center of it. Yet that same desperate evil has permeated all of human history. From Cain who murdered his brother Abel to this moment, from Assyria to Rome to modern nations, human hate and violence have brought a divine sentence of wrath and condemnation on all.

Make no mistake about it though, God is the world’s Creator, he is also our Judge. And that judgment is pure and perfect justice. The Lord sent Jonah into the midst of ancient Nineveh to bring them to repentance. And he sends his people today into the darkest and most rebellious places. But everything would change that day when the Father would send his own Son into our world.

He came and, from the moment of his miraculous conception, confounded every sin and evil of the ancient Assyrians and of every place and time, including our own. He, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, would be the great and final prophet whose sacrifice and proclaimed Word would redeem our fallen and hurting world. This prophet, the Christ, would defeat sin, death, and hell by dying and rising. He continues to bind the power of Satan every time a sinful human being is baptized and every time the redeemed gather for his blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Lord's mercy is yours and mine.

What changed eternity for Assyria, for Jonah, for Israel, and for us came not through destruction but, instead, through the punishment for all sin, inflicted not on the sinner but once and for all upon the sinless Sacrificial Lamb, upon the Christ whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed for the forgiveness of our sin. Human sin must be met with divine justice. But the love of Jesus Christ compelled him to offer himself as the bearer of all of humanity's sin.

The center point of all history is found on that hill called Calvary and in the message that came from an empty tomb: “*Christ is risen!*” He who created you and redeemed you in Jesus Christ has not only visited you but embraced you in the water of your Baptism and in the blessed meal of his Supper. As children of God, we know who he is and who we are. He is ours, and our lives are found in his resurrection, and nothing can take that away. Jesus lives, and we too shall live eternally with him in heaven.

Amen