

## Jonah 3:1-10

**3**The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”



<sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. <sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then 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. <sup>8</sup>Human 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. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” <sup>10</sup>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.

Contemporary commentators have puzzled over the book of Jonah for ages. Is it meant to be serious history, a fable of theological import, or a comedy of satire and farce? Perhaps all of these, perhaps not quite any of these. There are some strange and bizarre elements to the story: repentant farm animals; a borrowed psalm; and a three day sojourn in the belly of a sea monster.

But, let's start at the beginning. The word of the Lord comes to a little Hebrew prophet. It's a word he'd rather not hear. It's about that vast and terrible empire of the Assyrians and their capital city; a city of great and appalling sin—Nineveh.

It's a city mentioned in Genesis, reportedly founded by the infamous Nimrod along the Tigris River in what is today Iraq. Nimrod was Noah's great-grandson, a powerful ruler and a mighty hunter before the Lord. The city and its people were believed to be wholly corrupt and deeply wicked.

The prophet Nahum unleashed a torrent of prophetic denunciations against the city, declaring it to be a "city of blood, full of deceit, filled with plunder, no end to its spoils." It is a city of "countless debaucheries" which seduces and destroys the nations of the earth.

Nahum predicts death for Nineveh. There's nothing comical about his little prophetic book. There's no mercy, no grace, no life-saving fish, or sackcloth covered heifers. Nahum predicts war and desolation; corpses piled in the streets, bodies on top of bodies, so many dead that people stumble over the bodies.

But not Jonah, Jonah is told to warn Nineveh of their coming destruction. It's a job he has no interest accepting. Why bother with that terrible place? If God has decided to judge and destroy them, why is there a need for the prophet to risk his own life to warn them of the destruction they've brought on themselves? They have no fear of the Lord. They deserve their destruction. Why should Jonah stand in the way of the terrible and swift arm of the Lord? Jonah had a nice, comfortable pulpit to preach in the suburbs of Israel. Preaching to those lost in the heart of sin and violence was not on his itinerary.

Once in the sea port of Joppa, Jonah does a quick Google maps search and discovers that the furthest city of the known world in the opposite direction was Tarshish. While the city and its location are now a mystery, one theory is that it was located over 2200 miles to the west on the edge of Spain. Just as luck would have it, there happened to be a ship down in Joppa headed right for Tarshish.

Tarshish sounded perfect! The Bible references Tarshish as an international commercial hub where metals were smelted, refined, and shipped—silver, gold, and iron. Perhaps Jonah imagined himself getting lost in the smog and ash of that great city—he could become a ghost, invisible to God's own eye.

So he pays his due and boards the ship, hoping to escape from the presence of the Lord. Things do not go as planned. A fierce storm panics the ship's crew. They fear for their lives. They pray to their gods. Still the storm rages with no sign of relenting. Then they find Jonah sleeping like a baby down in the hull of the ship, wholly unconcerned. Why worry over a little storm at sea when the alternative is a death march to Sodom? They plead with him to pray also to his god (or, God) that the storm might cease.

The desperate sailors cast lots to see who might be the cause of their calamity, and it falls squarely on the little Hebrew prophet. They question him: Who are you? What is your occupation? Who is your

god? When they learn that Jonah's God is the God of heaven and the very creator of earth and sea, they are even more afraid.

Jonah tells them to throw him overboard but they refuse, not wanting to be guilty of killing an innocent man. So they row the boat toward the shore, but when this too fails, they begin to cry out to the Lord and to make sacrifices to the Lord. Finally, in desperation they obey Jonah and throw him overboard.

This little scene reminds us of Jesus in the hull of the ship during a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee. It is the disciples who panic, many of whom are experienced sailors. Jesus sleeps peacefully on a pillow, the waves rocking him into dreamland like a baby in a crib.

Once Jonah is overboard, that most infamous and unforgettable part of the story unfolds—Jonah is swallowed by a massive sea creature. Too many commentators have worried over what kind of animal could swallow a man whole. Was it a sperm whale or some ancient fish now extinct? Such speculation misses entirely the point of the story. Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the fish isn't part of a lesson in natural science. It's a theological story.

Another mistake commentators sometimes make is to assume that the whale is there to punish Jonah. This was certainly my understanding as a child. Who would want to be swallowed by some massive sea creature and ride in its belly for days? Talk about a dark, horrific, gross, terrifying experience! I don't even like riding elevators. No way I'd want to be the indigestible dietary mistake of a whale for 72 hours!

But, Jonah interprets the event as part of God's saving plan. And here we find a rather beautiful little psalm. It could have come from David's own lips:

'I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.' As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

It's a beautiful psalm, and quite appropriate, but one can't help but get the feeling it was borrowed from some other place and pasted in the narrative. Nevertheless, Jonah sees the life-saving fish as act of divine grace. It also serves the purposes of the Lord and spews Jonah right out on the beach. Now his journey will be overland and not water.

It's also interesting to note the downward movements of Jonah. He runs down to Joppa, boards a ship headed Tarshish. Gets thrown into the sea and sinks down into the belly of Sheol. Indeed, running away from God is a downward movement, and Jonah has hit rock bottom and lived to tell the tale.

Now our passage this morning picks up the rest of the story. Jonah hears the word of the Lord a second time—all the more forceful and clear—go to Nineveh and tell them of the coming destruction.

Within the context of the narrative itself, Nineveh becomes a character in the story, an archetype of pagan disobedience and unbelief, and not unlike the Good Samaritan in that most famous Jesus parable, the people of Nineveh manage to display more faithfulness than the Jewish insider who has travel to warn them of coming calamity.

Nineveh does a complete about face upon hearing the warning from Jonah. King, people, and even the animals don sackcloth and express deep regret. They hear; they believe; and they repent. Their faithfulness seems worlds above that of the prophet sent to them. The Lord sees their faith and relents from the evil he had planned against them.

Over the weekend, I met a modern day Jonah down in New Orleans by the shores of our mighty river, the Mississippi. This modern day Jonah, a homeless Latino man in his 40's or 50's, told me about how America had fallen into complete lawlessness, and how God's coming retribution was going to be swift and terrible. Like Jonah, he did not say that there may still be time to repent and save America. He just warned that the end was near. He even had a hand drawn diagram to prove it—drawn on a piece of cardboard.

Unlike Nineveh, I paid him little heed. I tried to listen politely, but I was annoyed. I wanted to enjoy the sights of the Mississippi with my children and not listen to Jonah's sermon. I don't even like to listen to sermons on Sunday—I'd rather give them!

On the way home I told Robin about how I'd met a rag-tag, modern-day Jonah. And she laughed and said: Well, I guess you got a sermon illustration out of it.

Yes, I did, but, crazy as it was, there was some truth to what he was saying. No, I'm not saying that we are living in the "end times" and that our way of life will soon come to an abrupt and cataclysmic end. But, it is true that we have all gone astray. Not simply as a nation. Our nation has changed for both good and bad, that's true, but what has happened is much more significant than one or two wayward nations.

In our modern world over the last two to three hundred years, we've collectively lost our ability to hear about grace and love, forgiveness and mercy. We are all having trouble hearing the voice of God and believing that peace and mercy, love and forgiveness are more powerful than vengeance and violence. The Ninevites listened only when face with certain and total destruction. Sadly, I fear we will not listen, even in the face of destruction.

But the story of Jonah is not about destruction; it's about grace. Jonah is not ready for God's grace, especially for God's mercy on those low-down, dirty, no-good Ninevites.

Jonah becomes indignant, and instead of a psalm, he unleashes a rant:

'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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'

Poor Jonah. The Lord gives him a bush to sleep under, and the next day it's eaten by a worm, and again he's so angry he prays for his own death. How could God destroy his little bush?

God answers him:

'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And 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?'

John Calvin offered this strange little book up as a remarkable proof of God's grace, and indeed it is. There is grace bestowed on a sinful city of 120,000 persons—men, women, and children—who've all been acting foolish and ignorant. God's mercy even saves the animals of the people. God recognizes the people of Nineveh as children—creatures over which the Lord has labored and loved. It does not matter that they are Gentile outsiders. They are children who have listened.

But, God's grace is perhaps even more prominently displayed on Jonah. Jonah was disobedient, petulant, angry, unbending, and egotistical—yet the Lord loved him still, even restoring him to his status as prophet.

It's been said that God does not call the equipped, but equips the called. Very true, Jonah was called and very poorly equipped. It took a stormy sea, a giant fish, cows in sackcloth, and a worm-eaten bush to get through to the thick-skulled prophet, but finally perhaps he got the message: It's about divine grace.

Perhaps, this is why Jesus himself compared his three day sojourn in the grave to Jonah's three days in the belly of a whale. It's a strange comparison—Jesus comparing himself to Jonah—until we remember that the story of Jonah is the story of grace—grace bestowed in abundance on both insider and outsider, believer and almost believer, rebel and rabble-rouser alike.

Jesus' three days in sheol is the "Sign of Jonah," because it bestows overflowing abundance of grace upon a broken and hurting world.

Amen.