

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series through the Old Testament book of Jonah, which is a masterfully told story with a great deal of relevance to our lives today. Over the last three weeks, we looked at the chapters 1 & 2 of Jonah and talked about how God called Jonah and calls us to find our identity and purpose in Him and to share His message with others. But Jonah, like many of us, rejected that call. Instead of submitting to that call and finding true purpose and freedom, he decided to run as far as he could from God's call. We saw that although he boarded a ship and tried to sail as far as he could in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go, he could not escape from God's omnipresent sovereignty. As others on the ship experience a storm of suffering because of Jonah's disobedience, it becomes evident that the only way to survive will be for Jonah to be thrown overboard, to submit himself to God's saving discipline. And so, the sailors reluctantly throw Jonah overboard, where God provides a great fish to swallow him up. And in the belly of the great fish, Jonah prays to God and acknowledges that those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs, and that salvation comes from the Lord. He is willing, finally, to go to Ninevah. Let's pick up the story in chapter 3:

Jonah 3:1-10 - *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city-- a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." ¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*

So now that Jonah is out of the belly of the fish, God speaks to Jonah once again, calling him to bring a prophetic message to Ninevah. And this time, Jonah goes. He preaches a message of judgment: "Forty more days and Ninevah will be overturned," and incredibly, Ninevah believes the message. They fast, they put on

sackcloth – a common expression of humility, and even the king comes off his throne to put on sackcloth and sit down in the dust. And God responds to their actions by having compassion on them and not bringing about the promised destruction.

Jonah's experience bring to mind this passage of Paul's for me:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 - When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

All of the wisest and most persuasive words could not have changed the hearts of the Ninevites, but a simple message delivered in the power of God can bring even the most violent civilization to its knees before God. The same is true today. So let us pray that God would anoint this message with His power.

Jonah 3 is a simple story, but Ninevah's experience in this passage is at the heart of spiritual reality. Four things in particular:

1) We are not naturally good but rebels against a holy God

In Jonah, there is no one that is right with God: not the sailors, who are praying to the wrong gods, not the Ninevites, who need a message of judgment preached to them, and certainly not Jonah, who runs away from God. All are in need of something to turn them to faith in the true God. And this is the reality for all of us. We are not naturally good people, but rebels against a holy God.

The other day I read the following on a friend's Facebook page: "Being yourself is never the wrong thing to do." Sounds like a wonderful expression to like, very much in step with this age of authenticity. But when I read that, it made me want to leave this snarky comment: "said Hitler." What if Hitler said that? Could it be that being yourself is at least sometimes the wrong thing to do? We are not naturally good people who just need to follow their heart and this world will be a wonderful place. We are rebels against a holy God.

One of my favorite podcasts is The Happiness Lab, a look at the science of happiness, which in the intro of every session makes the assertion that our minds lie to us all the time. The premise of the show is that so often, the things that we think will make us happy don't. Following your heart and being yourself is not as straightforward a path to happiness as you think. The Bible puts it this way:

Jeremiah 17:9 - The **heart is deceitful** above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

We are all not naturally good but are rebels against a holy God. Even though we were created in God's image and certainly capable of good things, we are all fallen, and every part of us is corrupted.

Romans 3:9-12 - What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

Romans 3:23 - all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

We are not naturally good, but rebels against a holy God.

2) Judgment and destruction is the end to which we are headed

Ninevah is headed towards destruction, and so God sends Jonah to warn them of their need to give up their sin and violence.

As our country becomes less religious, would you say that things are getting better or worse? It was certainly not perfect before, but I would argue that things are getting worse. We are seeing increased anxiety, depression, polarization, hatred, suspicion, deaths of despair, and so on.

And our predicament is much worse than just individual angst and cultural decay. Because death comes for everyone, and in the end we will all stand before the God who created us to account for our lives.

Hebrews 9:27-28 - Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to **face judgment**, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people;

and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

All have fallen short. And we all deserve death:

Romans 6:23 - *For the wages of sin is death..*

And we are all under God's wrath.

Romans 1:18 - *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,*

This is our predicament. We are rebels against a holy God, and one day we will stand before His judgment seat.

3) **God wants everyone to be saved from destruction**

God does not want the sailors, the Ninevites, or even Jonah to be lost. Despite our rebellion and the judgment we deserve, God does not want us to be lost:

1 Timothy 2:3-4 - *This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

2 Peter 3:9 - *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

But how can a holy God forgive a rebellious people? He took the punishment we deserved on the cross and offers us a way to be right with Him.

John 3:16-18 - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

Jesus came to save.

4) **Repentance and faith is how we are saved**

Jonah 3:6- *When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust*

Notice how the king gets off the throne. This is repentance: no longer enthroning yourself as lord but putting Him on the throne. Not my will but yours be done. A change of mind, change of heart, change of lord.

Not just repentance but faith. It is action. Life commitment. Trust in His mercy. See how this is the common call in the New Testament:

Mark 1:14-15 - *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

Luke 5:30-32 - *But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" ³¹ Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*

Luke 24:46-47 - *He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."*

Acts 2:36-38 - *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." ³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

Acts 20:20-21 - *You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*

It is much easier to preach a message that everyone is good just as they are, that "being yourself is never the wrong thing to do." But it's a lie. It's easier to preach a health and wealth prosperity message. But it's not true. The truth is that we are not

good as we are, and our world will be chaotic if everyone just lives according to the desires of their own heart. But there is forgiveness because of Christ's death on the cross for us

1 John 1:8-10 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

If you do not believe, repent and believe today.

And if you do believe, this is the message we must proclaim. It can be as clumsy as Jonah's message, but if it is in the power of the Holy Spirit, it will bear fruit:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 - When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

This is the challenge. Not to trust in wise and persuasive words but to preach the gospel of repentance and faith in Jesus and pray for God to fill that message with His supernatural power. Some will hate it, some will embrace it:

*2 Corinthians 2:14-16 - But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the **fragrance** of the knowledge of him. ¹⁵ For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the **fragrance** of life.*

Let us close by praying along with Paul in **Ephesians 6:19-20** - *Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.*