1-24-21, The Holy Way

Sermon on Jonah 3:1—5, 10

1. Introduction
2. The book of Jonah is included within the Minor Prophets, so-called because of the length or their writings, not their importance. And within the Minor Prophets, Jonah stands out as the only one that is primarily narrative, telling a story.
3. The story of Jonah deals with the city of Nineveh, the capitol city of the hated Assyrians.
4. The first part of the narrative of Jonah may be the best-known story in all of Scripture.
5. God sends Jonah to prophesy to the city of Nineveh.
6. Jonah runs off the other direction, taking a ship headed to Tarshish.
7. The ship runs into a disastrous storm, a result of God’s retribution.
8. Jonah is identified as the cause of the storm.
9. Jonah is willingly thrown off the ship into the sea, only to be swallowed by a great fish.
10. Jonah is grateful to God for being rescued, and the fish vomits Jonah up on shore.
11. Jonah returns to Palestine
12. Prayer
13. The text
14. (v. 1 & 2) The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” [With the exception of the phrase “a second time” this is virtually identical to God’s instruction to Jonah from Chapter 1. Jonah is getting a fresh start with a clean slate.]
15. (v. 3a) So Jonah set out [this was to be about a month-long journey] and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.
16. (v. 3b) Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three day’s walk across. [There are several ways to think about this. A day’s journey is usually estimated to be 20-25 miles, based on a pace of 3 miles per hour and an average of 8 hours of walking per day. There is no archeological evidence of Nineveh being 60-75 miles across. So this may be an expression meaning a really big city. It may be that it would take three days too walk the whole length of every street in the city. It may be that the three days would include the necessary meetings with community leaders to receive permission to preach in public. It may be that the reference is to Nineveh and the other cities surrounding it. In any case, this is the city to which Jonah has been sent.]
17. (v. 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!” [This word “overthrown” is the same one used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, rather than a political or military term.]
18. (v.5) And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. [This is a preacher’s dream. Jonah has just begun to preach, and everyone is convinced and begins to change. Sackcloth was worn as a sign of grief and repentance; probably the closest approximation for us would be to wear robes made out of burlap.]
19. (v. 6—9) In these intervening verses, the king hears of Jonah’s words. He immediately leaves his throne, puts on a robe of sackcloth, covers himself with ashes [another sign of grief and repentance] and issues a decree that every human being and every animal is ordered to:
20. Fast from both food and water
21. Be covered with sackcloth
22. Cry mightily to God
23. Turn from their wicked ways
24. (v. 10) When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind [We’ll talk about this in just a minute.] about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.
25. What shall we take away from this text this morning?

First, we need to look at the idea of God changing God’s mind. This is a very complicated and uncomfortable idea for us. To be blunt, we might ask, “If God can change God’s mind about destroying Nineveh, what else might change?” It’s a reasonable question to ask. For me, the comfort is in the fact that God’s decision was in the direction of mercy, and this is in keeping with God’s nature. God has made the decision to love us, which is consistent with who God is. I believe that we can rely on this love and be set free to love others as we have been loved.

There are a few other ideas that we can consider from the story of Jonah. One is that of Jonah’s reason to avoid prophesying to the people of Nineveh. And it’s simple: he hated them. He didn’t know any of them, but he hated them for who they were. Does that sound familiar to any of you today? Are you aware of any person or any groups who are hated, not because of anything other than being a part of the group? There is a reason we at The Holy Way are working to be a part of anti-racism efforts here in this area.

Another consideration is the issue of repentance. A regular part of our worship service is the Prayer of Confession and the Assurance of Pardon. I’m afraid that there is a tendency for us to see these as just bunches of words that we say and listen to, just another part of the routine. My dear friends, this is absolutely not true. When we join together in saying the Prayer of Confession, we are coming before the throne of God, admitting our failures and our shortcomings, and asking for forgiveness. This is an issue of considerable importance, and we shortchange ourselves if we don’t take itthe plan to destroy Nineveh seriously. The people of Nineveh, from the least to the greatest, took God at God’s word and repented of their wickedness; they serve as a model for us.

Another issue we can think about occurs in the Jonah story not long after the text we’re looking at today. Jonah sees that God has turned from the plan to destroy Nineveh, and what is his reaction? Is he thrilled that, as a result of his preaching (and God’s action) there has been a citywide repentance and turning from evil? No! Jonah is furious! He says to God, in essence, “This is just like you! You always do this, and I’m sick of it. I just want to die!”

I think this reflects an attitude that is very much at play today. Jonah seems to think that, if Nineveh receives God’s grace, that somehow diminishes the grace he himself has received. When we think of it, if anybody should celebrate God’s grace, it’s Jonah. He’s the one who was thrown into the ocean, only to be rescued by a large fish. He’s the one is given a second chance, a clean slate, to follow God’s instruction to him. But he just hates the fact that God shows grace to people Jonah doesn’t think deserves it.

My friends, we have been loved extravagantly. When you look back on my time serving you as your Interim Pastor, I hope that’s what you remember from me. God has loved us extravagantly. God has shown us extraordinary grace. Our only possible response is to love others extravagantly, ad to show others grace that, is some small way, resembles the grace we have received.

Are you willing to go on the journey God is calling you to, regardless of what that journey is? Are you prepared to acknowledge that you are loved by God because of God’s grace? Are you prepared to rejoice in the love you have been shown, and to respond with love for others? May it be so. Amen