July 30th: Nineveh

Today we continue our journey together into the story of Jonah. I've mentioned the past two weeks that as we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together. So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

Today we're taking a closer look at Jonah chapter 3–the arrival in Nineveh. We have a lot of ground to cover today, so let's pray.

Prophetic God,
When you call by us by name, you invite us into an eternal relationship. When you call us to be disciples, we are given a mission for the wellbeing of our neighbors. When you send us out into the world, we bear your good news to all nations. However, we acknowledge that what you ask of us isn't always easy–there are many challenges along the way. Our path is full of obstacles, and might find ourselves given a task that goes against our expectations or preconceived notions. We might wrestle with what we have been called to do, but

you encourage us to keep going. So this week, as we grapple with what it means to do ministry in a world defined by conflict and by enemies, prepare us to greet others as friends. Remind us that every single person we encounter is also your beloved child, designed for wholeness and destined for redemption. Amen.

A lot of Christians, when they read the Book of Jonah, basically stop at the end of chapter 2. And that makes sense–the story about a dangerous journey and a dramatic three days and nights spent in the belly of a fish is all done–there aren't any more boats, or waves, or merciful rescues. Or at least that's what we might think. I actually think that chapter 3 is when things really start to get interesting. Because this is the moment that Jonah has to embark on the journey that he was intended for in the first place. This is the moment when he has to do the thing that God had originally asked him to do–which was go to the city of Nineveh as a prophet and speak out against their wicked ways. Chapter three is when Jonah starts to go in the direction that he was meant for all along.

But there's a clear reason why Jonah was so frightened of this initial calling, so let's look at a little background–some history and geography that might help us make sense of this strange piece of the story.

The ancient civilization of Assyria began as a humble city state in the 21st century BCE, and by the 14th century BCE, it had become a veritable empire, at least until the 7th century BCE when it was eclipsed as the dominant power in the Near East by the Babylonian Empire to the south. The height of Assyrian control came in the 8th century BCE, with the establishment of the Sargonid dynasty in 722 BCE, which coincided with the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel. Under the leadership of King Sargon II and his successor, King Sennacherib, the city of Nineveh transitioned from simply being a large regional power to a modernized and strengthened imperial capital city.

Like the Assyrian kings before him, King Sennacherib was not just an administrator or a figurehead that served the Assyrian God, Ashur–he was a

“warrior-King,” whose role involved constant occupation and conquest of other territories. And like his royal ancestors, he saw imperial expansion as a moral duty–meant to serve the political and religious interests of the Assyrian culture. At this point in time, historians claim that the Assyrian army was the largest and most successful in the world–with up to several hundred thousand soldiers in charge of various regions and ongoing invasions.

Historians also assert that this gigantic military force was known for it’s ruthless qualities–including it’s brute strength and siege warfare techniques–both of which devastated smaller cities and villages. Detailed administrative records from this period describe the harsh treatment that conquered people groups received, and the reliefs and carvings that were used to decorate the new temples and palaces of Nineveh depicted gruesome battle scenes–including impalings and victory parades. King Sennacherib, after his conquest of the city of Babylon, is quoted as saying, “It’s inhabitants, young and old, I did not spare, and with their corpses I filled the streets of their city.”

Brutal, right?

In the Israelite imagination, Nineveh was not just an evil city, the center of enemy territory, it also represented an imminent threat to their own safety and future. Much of our Old Testament is either written during or about this time period–King Sennacherib was the contemporary of King Hezekiah of Judah, and the writings of the prophet Isaiah–both of whom spoke out heavily against the Assyrians. The minor prophet Nahum is obsessed with God’s condemnation of Nineveh, his whole text preaches their total ruin and apocalyptic destruction. Another minor prophet, Zephaniah, is also fanatical about the city, and he also predicts the fall of the Assyiran empire due to their wickedness.

So if you were Jonah, would you want to enter such a city? If you were Jonah, would you have agreed to journey to such a place? I probably would have run in other direction too. But Jonah finally obeys God’s command.

We begin with this statement from our author: **“**Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

So we see that God repeats the instructions for Jonah to journey as a prophet to Nineveh, and God is clear that Jonah doesn’t even have to do any of the hard work, the message will already be prepared for him and given directly to him.

This time, we hear that Jonah obeys, and he traveled many miles to this city in an unfamiliar land. Our text tells us that Nineveh was a large city, large enough that it would take three days for a traveler to make it from one side to the other. Verse four says, “Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’” That’s it, that’s Jonah’s whole sermon. That’s the entire message that God has given Jonah to preach to the Assyrians. A one liner. That’s really it.

Makes me wish God would do the same for me! A single sentence sermon would be so much easier!

But miraculously, this simple phrase is enough to convict the Ninevites–apparently all it took was a pronouncement of their upcoming doom for them to see the light about their bad behavior and their brutal war campaigns and their mistreatment of the poor and marginalized. After this one line message, we hear this in verse five, “The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, a fast was a sign of repentance, a decision that was made to intentionally abstain from not only food, but also as a religious cleansing–it was supposed to atone from the bad behavior, and reset the individual or community for a new or renewed commitment to a God or practice. And sackcloth was a coarsely woven fabric, similar to modern burlap, that denoted mourning or penitence. Wearing sackcloth was a sign of ultimate humility, a outward symbol of grief or submission.

And in Jonah's story, this act of repentance wasn't just something that a few Ninevites participated it–it came from the top down. Verse 6 records, "When Jonah's warning 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." He issued a proclamation that said: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

Many biblical scholars like to point out that the Assyrian King in this story is thematically similar to the sailors that we encountered in chapter 1. The sailors from many lands who all had their own gods, and the king of this foreign land, both receive instructions from God or from God's messenger, and both obey. They do as they are told! Shouldn't these people be the heroes of the story instead of the villains? It's Jonah–one of God's own people–who has the trouble. That's biblical irony for you.

So just like the sailors who threw Jonah overboard and then vowed to follow God and offered sacrifices, the King in chapter 3 commits his entire city to changing their ways. And verse 10 tells us that this has a confusing result: "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."

As you can imagine, this is not the conclusion to the chapter that many people are expecting. And as you can imagine, I have some questions. Perhaps you have some too.

Here's what came to mind this week as I read more about this story:

Isn't this the Nineveh that Isaiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah prophesied would fall in a blaze of divine annhilation? Aren't these the enemies that Jonah's contemporaries would like to see massacred as justice for what had been done

to God's people? Why in the world would there be forgiveness for these ancient adversaries who had caused so much harm and lived their lives with so much brutality? Why would Jonah's text have a message that contradicts the writings of his fellow prophets who have also received a message from God?

As it turns out–Jonah is also dealing with some pretty significant cognitive dissonance around this–which we'll deal with when we get to chapter 4. It turns out that this chapter runs contrary to a lot of our expectations for God, and it flips the entire paradigm of biblical justice. We could spend a lot more time working through what that means, and I promise we will on a future Sunday, but here's where I'll wrap this up for today:

I said last week that Christians who read this text often come to the conclusion that the story of Jonah is about punishment: that this text supports a theology of discipline for anyone who makes a mistake or goes down the wrong path. And because so many people see this narrative through that lens, the so-called "punishment" in this story is all they can perceive. We expect punishment for Jonah, we expect punishment for the evil Assyrians. But the book of Jonah is not really about punishment at all–which I think we really get to see in this chapter.

Punishment should have been an option for disobedient Jonah, but God chose to rescue him instead from certain death instead. Punishment was prophesied to the city of Nineveh, but because they repented and changed their ways, God rescues them from destruction instead. It doesn't seem to make a difference that Jonah's crime was relatively small, and the crimes of the Assyrians were on a much larger scale. It doesn't seem to matter that Jonah belongs to God's people, and the Assyrians are decidedly outside of God's covenant with the nation of Israel. It doesn't seem to matter that Jonah is a prophet and the Ninevites are brutal soldiers. None of that changes the fact that God has rescued both of them.

As we'll see, Jonah has some pretty angry thoughts about whether or not the city of Nineveh deserves God's forgiveness, but apparently God never stops to wonder whether or not the Ninevites deserve grace–just like God didn't withhold grace from Jonah. Jonah clearly categorizes Nineveh as his enemy, just like his fellow Old Testemant writers do, but I don't think that God sees the Ninevites the same way. I don't think God sees any enemies at all. Only people, near and far, to be rescued and loved.

So Jonah's story could have been about discipline, but it's a story about love instead. Love for the misguided, love for the foreigner, even love for the so-called enemy. Love for prophets, love for soldiers, love for the individual, love for the nation.

My friends, I think it does us some good to remind ourselves that God's story has first and foremost always been a story of rescue. It might do us some good to see God's ongoing relationship with human beings through a lens of love, rather than a lens of punishment or a lens of metering out compassion based upon some assumptions about who is worthy and who is not. It might do us some good this week to remind our conflicted and fractious hearts that there aren't any enemies in God's eyes, and so there shouldn't be any in our eyes either. That, I think, would really turn our world upside down for the better.

Amen.